

A STAND VINDICATED

**The 200th Anniversary of the Abolition of the
Transatlantic Slave Trade in the British Empire,
March 25th, 1807.**



**Aiyegoro Ome - President
National Joint Action Committee** Since 1970, the
National Joint Action
Committee (NJAC)
continuously main-
tained the observance
of August 1st, Eman-
cipation Day and cam-
paigned for the day to
be officially
recognised, leading to
its declaration as a
public holiday by the
Government of
Trinidad and Tobago in 1985.

That declaration, in honour of the 150th Anniversary of Emancipation Day, has its own significance, since it had put Trinidad and Tobago in the unenviable position of being the only country in the entire world at that time to have given formal recognition to any aspect of the slave trade, slavery and Emancipation. NJAC, as well, has been successfully pursuing the Internationalisation of August 1st as Emancipation Day since 1996, through one of its institutions, the Caribbean Historical Society.

It was therefore very gratifying to NJAC, when it learnt that the United Nations had agreed to hold special commemorative activities to mark the 200th Anniversary of the Abolition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade throughout the then existing British Empire.

The Abolition of the Slave Trade and the Emancipation of enslaved Africans are two events which have reverberated through modern times. Both were significant milestones in the reconstruction of world history, particularly the history of African people.

The celebration of both events will be the contribution of the National Action Cultural Committee (NACC) as well as the Caribbean Historical Society (CHS) to the national reverence which must be paid to those who suffered during the slave trade and slavery times. They will also be part of the reverence which is due to those who fought against the slave trade and slavery.

The British abolition of the Slave Trade on March 25th 1807 is acknowledged as the first European declaration which seriously affected the centuries old traffic in human beings from Africa.

Even though the government of Denmark had ended their slave trade in 1803, Britain was the major slave-trading nation in the 19th century and Britain alone had the naval power to stop other nations from trafficking in African captives.

The United States of America declared an end to their slave trading the following year, on January 1st 1808. In quick succession, Sweden (1813), the Netherlands (1814) and France (1818) ended their participation in this infamous activity. The trade finally petered out when Cuba (1860) and Brazil (1888) under Portugal's control abolished sla-

very all entirely.

The commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the British participation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade takes place in the midst of a number of events which place the infamous trade in its true perspective.

In the 1990's UNESCO launched the Transatlantic Slave Trade Project, (TST) the rationale was due to the "recognition of the need for the importance of teaching about the Transatlantic Slave Trade, since this major historical event has not been studied sufficiently in schools".

A number of schools worldwide are involved in this study via the UNESCO Associated Schools Project (ASP net). UNESCO noted that, "Through an advanced and comprehensive study of the TST, students should come to an understanding of the enormous historical significance of the process of the Diaspora of Africa's people in the modern era". At least 10 schools in Trinidad & Tobago were part of the pilot project.

In 1992, when the late Pope John Paul II visited the embarkation point for captive Africans on Goree Island, Senegal, he prayed at "the door of No Return" and blessed the descendants of those who had been forcibly taken from their Motherland. John Paul II, who was one of the more influential Popes during the Twentieth Century, referred to "the horrible aberration of those who reduced to slavery the brothers and sisters whom the Gospel has destined for freedom".

The Pope asked forgiveness for the Roman Catholic's Church's participation in the Maafa, "From this African shrine of black pain we beg pardon from history".

Nine years later, Christiane Taubira, the African

Guyanese member of the French parliament was able to get the French government to declare slavery as “a crime against humanity”, following years of her personal campaign to have the West recognise the need to recollect and archive the world’s collective memory about the slave trade.

During President Clinton’s historic visit to Africa in 1998, the first time that a sitting president of the United States of America had been to the continent, the American leader observed, “...going back to the time before we were even a nation, European Americans received the first fruits of the slave trade and we were wrong in that...”

At the 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban South Africa, African Union nations demanded a clear apology for the enslavement of Africans, from the former slave-trading countries of Europe. Some European nations were ready to express an apology, but the opposition, mainly from the United Kingdom, Spain, Netherlands, Portugal, and the United States blocked attempts to do so. A fear of monetary compensation was one of the reasons for the opposition.

On July 1st 2002, the Government of the Netherlands unveiled ‘A National Slavery Monument’ in Amsterdam in commemoration of the 139th Anniversary of the ending of chattel slavery throughout the Dutch colonial empire.

This monument came about after a long campaign by activists in the Netherlands to commemorate a trade in human misery that enriched the ship-owners and merchants of its former empire. Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands marked the anniversary of the Dutch abolition of chattel slavery on July 1st 1863 by unveiling a ‘Bronze Sculpture’ of

a slave in the presence of diplomats and officials in one of Central Amsterdam's biggest parks.

The National Foundation for the Commemoration of Enslavement and Slavery in the Netherlands had campaigned for years for a monument as a symbol of atonement by a seafaring nation that was active in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Dutch seamen and merchants built a global empire that included Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Surinam and territories in the Caribbean.

According to the Urban Development Minister in the Government of the Netherlands:

“We hope you share our conviction - of which this monument is an expression - that facing the past, confronting the injustice done, is the only way to create a tolerant and free world.”

In 2004, on the 200th anniversary of the Haitian Revolution which is recognized as the only successful slave rebellion in world history, the United Nations declared the “International Year to Commemorate the Struggle Against Slavery and its Abolition”

In 2006, the French President Jacques Chirac stated that French children should be taught the history of slavery both at primary and secondary schools. The same year, the French government also declared May 10th as an annual “Slavery Memorial Day” so that France could acknowledge the part it played in the slave trade. The French President Jacques Chirac said, “The issue of slavery is a wound for a large number of our fellow citizens”.

In 2006, as well, the Anglican Church, acknowledged the part which it played in the slave trade and it has apologized to the descendants of the victims of slavery for the

damage done.

Archbishop Rowan, leader of the Anglican Communion said “The body of Christ is not just a body that exists at one time, it exists across history and we therefore share the shame and the sinfulness of our predecessors and part of what we can do, with them and for them in the body of Christ, is prayerful acknowledgement of the failure that is part of us, not just of some distant, ‘them’.”

This year the British Government has set up a committee to commemorate the end of the slave trade. In the words of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, writing in the Sunday New Nation, a black community newspaper in Britain...”*The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade stands as one of the most inhuman enterprises in history. At a time when the capitals of Europe and America championed the Enlightenment of man, their merchants were enslaving a continent. Slavery’s impact*”, continued Tony Blair, “*upon Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas and Europe was profound. As we approach the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of that abolition, it is only right we also recognise the active role Britain played until then in the slave trade, British industry and ports were intimately intertwined in it. Britian’s rise to global pre-eminence was (partially) dependent on a system of colonial slave labour and as we recall its abolition, we would also recall our place in its practice.*”

The Struggle to bring to an end the trans-Atlantic slave Trade as well as the institution of slavery in Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean represents one of the most epic battles ever fought by mankind. The whole truth of this 500 year battle is yet to be told. Likewise, at least four

states in the United States of America - Virginia, Missouri, Georgia and ... have either passed legislation, or have pending legislation calling for a public apology for the USA's participation in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Significantly as well, on February 24th, 2007, the Virginia General Assembly passed a resolution acknowledging "with profound regret the involuntary servitude of Africans and the exploitation of Native Americans, and called for the reconciliation among all Virginians." With the passing of this resolution, Virginia became the first of the 50 United States to acknowledge through the states governing body their states' negative involvement in slavery. The passing of this resolution comes on the heels of the 400th Anniversary celebration of the city of Jamestown, Virginia, which was the first permanent British colony, in what would become the United States, to survive. Jamestown is also recognised as one of the first slave ports of the American colonies which at that time was under British colonial rule.

The Trinidad Express on Wednesday 28th, 2007 published the following article relating to the observance of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the Slave Trade around the world. *"The African slaves being led to cell blocks pierced the air as their lives were re-enacted by Dominicans to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the end of Britain's Trans-Atlantic slave trade.*

Re-enactors walked in chains to Rousseau's Baracoon Building, where slaves were held before being auctioned off to plantation owners in the former French and British colony and which now houses the City Council. "In Jamaica, Symbolic funeral rites were performed in Kingston Harbour for slaves who died during the ocean journey". "In Guyana, a tribute was held in the parlia-

ment buildings where slaves were beaten and sometimes hanged". Guyana's President, Bharrat Jagdeo denounced as lip service, recent comments condemning slavery. In addressing a ceremony for the bicentenary of the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, President Jagdeo called for Europe to pay reparations for horrors of the slave trade".

In St. Lucia, students re-enacted the slaves' struggles for freedom. A region wide moment of silence was also held at 12:00 noon on Sunday March 25th, 2007. Dr. Ralph Gonsalves, Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and current Chairman of the Caricom Community, stated, "We must never forget. We are collectively engaged in commemorating and paying tribute to all those who triumphed over the anguish of enslavement, of injustice and disenfranchisement and who helped to bring about the abolition of...the trading and transportation of human cargo across the Atlantic".

"Slavery was based on criminality, callous greed and murder," said Violet Jean Baptiste, a spokeswoman for the Guyana-based African, Cultural and Development Association. "Members of royalty, insurance companies and banks, politicians, clergymen and businessmen amassed fortunes on their human animals".

Bongo Wisely Tafari, a spokesman for St. Lucia's Rastafarian movement who participated in the island's tribute, called on the government to seek reparations from the British. "It is time the Caribbean Leaders correct this historic wrong," he said. For some, the anniversary was an opportunity to explore the debilitating legacies of the slave trade, which have left some islanders unsure of their ancestry and questioning their identity".

“There was a long, important proud history in Africa before slavery,” said Halstead Byron, an adviser to the Nevis Ministry of Culture. “We need to look at what happened and see the positive things that came out of the eventual abolition of slavery and what has transpired since that with our own development.

“We are in a world where the developed countries are enriching themselves with the toil of people in developing countries” Dominica’s Prime Minister, Roosevelt Skerrit said”. The Republic of Ghana, which celebrated 50 years of independence from Britain on March 6th, 2007, commemorated the bicentenary with a ceremony at a white-washed former slave fort at Elmina Castle with singers and performers from Africa, the Caribbean and London”.

“Many Ghanians expressed outrage at the brutality of a trade that shipped millions of Africans into bondage. “It was so bad the way they maltreated our ancestors, the way they chained them and imprisoned them for so many years”. The Leader of Britain’s House of Lords, Baroness Amos - a descendent of slaves - spoke at this ceremony and declared slavery “one of the most shameful and uncomfortable chapters in British history”.

In Britain itself, thousands marched through London on March 24th, 2007 to mark the anniversary of the law abolishing the slave trade in Britain’s colonies. The “Walk of the Witness” as it was called, was led by the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu (a Ugandan born). It is against this background, therefore, that the National Joint Action Committee views our position taken since 1970 as visionary and instructive. The extent of the international participation in this 200th anniversary of the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic

Slave Trade, supported by the United Nations represents in our view, A STAND VINDICATED!